

THE AGENT

CCA

West Oakland Stories

Introduction by the Editors

What is the right way for academic institutions to acknowledge and engage with the communities they intend to serve? How can they do it in a non-extractive and reciprocal way that benefits both community members and students, fostering genuine collaboration and mutual learning? These questions lie at the heart of the community-engaged courses and initiatives spearheaded by the California College of the Arts (CCA) in recent years. Projects based in West Oakland, facilitated by CCA's Urban Works Agency (UWA), exemplify efforts to address these concerns. We decided to share-back some of the outcomes from these projects with West Oakland's community by way of a broadsheet, organizing the projects into four themes, each highlighting different facets of collaborative practice.

"ROOTED IN LIVED EXPERIENCE" emphasizes understanding how people interact with their environments daily. For instance, in the Digital Media Seminar, *Sites and Publics*, students documented neighborhood oral histories through

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Rooted in Lived Experience

Interview with Dorothy Lazard

BELONGING IS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE, by Vanessa Perez Winder
How can we better foster a sense of belonging in spaces and communities marked by historical displacement, ongoing gentrification, and broader systemic injustices? This multi-layered question set the tone of a recent, thought provoking conversation with Oakland-based public historian and former librarian Dorothy Lazard at the CCA Campus Gallery.

Having dedicated her life to public service and advocacy for over 40 years, Lazard retired in 2021 from her position as the head of Oakland Public Library's History Center. Since retiring, she has taken the time to work on her own projects, including her memoir, *What You Don't Know Will Make a Whole New World*, which was published in May 2023. In the book, Lazard recounts, with rigor and emotion, her nearly 55+ year-long history of living in the Bay Area, honing in on her experiences moving to San Francisco from St. Louis, MO in 1968, and later to West Oakland in the 1970s. Along with discussing her family dynamics and several personal anecdotes, Lazard also includes and documents elements of a painful history, shedding light on the ways in which anti-Black racism has impacted the residents of Oakland. As she points out in her book, this was done through social segregation, architectural destruction, re-development of imposing structures like freeways, and various other tactics of disruption and displacement.

"Like us, our neighborhood was in transition. There were a lot of promises being made to the people of West Oakland then. Everything was

interviews, uncovering hidden stories that enrich our understanding. Supported by the Creative Citizens in Action initiative (CCA@CCA), UWA welcomed public librarian and archivist **Dorothy Lazard** and participated in the Black Liberation Walking Tour with storyteller **David Peters**.

"KNOWLEDGE IS POWER" explores democratizing knowledge to empower residents and effect structural change. UWA partnered with community advocates to develop participatory research methods. The Advanced Urban Studio, *Property in Crisis*, collaborated with the East Bay Permanent Real Estate Collaborative (**EB PREC**) to reimagine property use and enhance social justice, resulting in the creation of a *Property Playbook* with innovative strategies. Similarly, the *Common Ground* studio partnered with environmental justice advocates **Ms. Margaret Gordon** and **Brian Beveridge** of the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project (WOEIP) to explore the ways in which the "ground floor" of the city can be reclaimed for community benefit.

"CO-CREATION IS CO-LIBERATION" builds on the principle that all participants contribute equally, fostering mutual learning and creative solutions. **Amana Harris**, CCA professor and executive director of **The Center for ArtEsteem** (AHC Oakland), emphasizes the reciprocity of learning, highlighted in the Attitudinal Principle #9: "We Are Students And Teachers To Each Other". Echoing Fannie Lou Hamer's slogan, "Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free," this approach underscores the importance of participatory practices for collective well-being. The research design project *Aging Against The Machine*, which involved UWA, Pratt University, and Barnard College, explored new ways to support aging residents and prevent displacement through the concept of "aging in place". Partnership with the San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative (**SPARC**) enabled a rich participatory design process with local residents, such as **Jesse Williams** and others.

"RADICAL IMAGINATION" is a concept that highlights the transformative potential of artistic and design practices. Advanced studios in urban design and architecture explored the idea of "urban commons", challenging traditional property ownership norms. For example, the *[Un]Common Ground* studio highlighted the divergent experience of various communities and reimagined public spaces to honor the ancestral knowledge, practices of the everyday,

coming. Supermarkets were coming. Jobs were coming. Newer, affordable, modern housing was coming. Oak Center, as our section of West Oakland was called, was composed of large vacant lots waiting to be filled in the name of progress, of urban renewal. Across from our apartment, a large billboard on the corner boasted that new houses were coming, but several years would pass before any houses would appear in the lot."

2

Knowledge Is Power

Interview with Ms. Margaret Gordon

GROUNDS FOR CO-CREATION, by Julia Grinkrug
The advanced urban studio "Common Ground: Re-Making the Ground Floor," of Spring 2021, emerged in the midst of the pandemic and at the peak of *Black Lives Matter* movement. Partnering with community leaders and social justice advocates, we wanted to rethink the way we teach from its core. We shaped the studio as a community research collective, where community partners acted as institutional equals, defining the terms and conditions for the studio. Focusing on the "who" in the urban drama, we explored the city through the eyes of the actual people, who battle structural inequities on the ground. **Ms. Margaret Gordon**, the co-director of West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project and one of the studio partners, reflected on her mentorship experience in the post-studio interview.

Julia Grinkrug: In your eyes, what is the role of education with regards to social justice?

and community led leadership, culminating in a public symposium on *[Un]Commoning Architectural Language*, where artists discussed Afrofuturism as a tool for expanding imaginative possibilities. Additionally, the *Common Space: Reframing the Library* studio responded to the community battle to reopen the Hoover Durant Public Library, envisioning a reimagined library as a multipurpose civic institution that meets diverse community needs.

These projects demonstrate how academic institutions can engage with communities in ways that foster mutual learning and collaboration. By focusing on lived experiences, shared knowledge, co-creation, and imaginative practices, both community members and students can benefit, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive environment. This broadsheet itself is a product of a collaboration between UWA and the **San Pablo Avenue Community Newspaper**, supported by the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (**EBALDC**).

RESEARCH & DESIGN INITIATIVES WITH WEST OAKLAND COMMUNITY

/2020 *Property In Crisis*, Advanced Urban Studio;
/2020 *Reclaiming Land: Decommodifying Property for Racial and Social Equity* - Symposium; /2021 *Common Ground: Re-Making The Ground Floor* - Advanced Urban Studio /2021 *Aging Against The Machine*, Research Project, CCA, Open Workshop, Barnard College, Daniels Faculty; /2021 /2022 *Sites and Publics* - Masters of Architecture Digital Media Seminar; /2021/2022 *Common Space: Re-Framing the Library*, Masters of Architecture Studio; /2021 *Social Infrastructure From The Ground Up*, Symposium; /2022 *[Un]Common Ground: Revealing The Ground Floor*, Advanced Urban Studio; /2022 *[Un]Commoning Architectural Language*, Symposium; /2022 *Manifold Enclosures*, Research Project, Article in Public Culture; /2023 *Belonging Is An Act Of Resistance*, Symposium Hosting Dorothy Lazard

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Image: "Social and Anti-Social Infrastructure", by Lizzy Wilson & Elif Aydinli, (Digital Media Seminar, Sites and Publics, Master of Architecture, 2021)

Ms. Margaret Gordon: One of the things that we want you to learn, to un-learn is how to be engaged with the community and our process. I thought: "How do we give you something that you have never experienced, and how to take that experience to another level, another phase of the process; to be engaged from the White House to the outhouse and everything in between, to have that experience?" We knew that we had to treat you like a can opener, crank you up a little bit by little bit at a time to keep your balance. I think that this really gave you the ability to start rooting yourself in, and growing and sprouting to see the bigger picture; I have a vision for the bigger picture to have to educate.

JG: What is your view of power relationships in the educational system?
MG: That's another look at education that the civil society does not practice. How do you dismiss what power is? Education is a service for both sides. There's a service to the community also to empower them, to give them power to perform as equals; understand their position of power, being positioned at the table. Because at the end of the day, we [community organizers] are setting the table for them to have the voice; them to have the strategy; them to understand how to do research and to collect data and to translate it based on their life experiences; and to have a place to agree to disagree, to struggle for unity, for one struggle.

JG: How do you see the future of urban planning and its role in shaping communities?
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MG: I think one of the things that has happened to us, here in the United States -- we mistake our behavior with what is the mechanics of it. We went from industrialization mechanics, to computerization mechanics, now we're going have AI mechanics. Our minds are all wrapped around what that is. But we are not dealing with human beings. That's the disconnect that we have been putting ourselves in. It's the mind-set of commercialization: of what is trending, and how do we keep it up. It's always about the "I" and very seldom about the "We". But even inside the "I", how do you insert yourself into the "we"? To be in an understanding of different modes of engagement and what that means to your community, where you live, work and play, means to go beyond the mechanics. You have a stake in this process, to be a stakeholder, and speak; to be able to bring your experience to this table, to make change and bring prosperity. Prosperity, I say, and I want to distinguish between prosperity and privilege. We are not elevating people to talk about some of us, few of us to have prosperity. Me, as an advocate, I'm talking about *PROSPERITY FOR ALL*.

From the interview with Amana Harris, by the Master of Architecture students in the Digital Media Seminar, "Sites and Publics", Fall 2021

AGING AGAINST THE MACHINE, by Neeraj Bhatia, Karen Kubej, Ignacio González Galán

Aging is not a problem to be solved. The problem is the range of barriers—physical, social, financial, and cultural—that make it difficult to grow older with dignity and in community in America. Older people in the United States are often either isolated at home or subjected to institutionalized forms of care at exorbitant costs. This project explores a number of alternative housing and community development scenarios for aging in place in West Oakland, which seek to open up multiple options for care, improve physical access to the city, enhance resource sharing, and strengthen community ties.

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Co-Creation is Co-Liberation

Interview with Amana Harris

INTERVIEW WITH AMANA HARRIS
Amana Harris is a leader in the field of community arts and a well-respected advocate for the arts in K-12 education. Her book, *Self As SuperHero: Handbook on the Creation of the Life-Size Self-Portrait* is a testament to her 30 years of experience in arts education and the power of art to inspire children, youth and communities. As Executive Director, Amana leads the vision and mission of **The Center for ArtEsteem**, a West Oakland-based nonprofit founded in 1989. She's been a Professor at California College of the Arts' Critical Ethnic Studies Program since 2008.

AH: I have lived in west Oakland since I was 23. It's been a very small community, where everybody knows everybody; a community of really active, motivated and passionate people. One beautiful thing about it is that I don't just live and operate here as a resident, but I also serve as an advocate and activist, being fully immersed. [...]

My mother has paved the way for me to do the work that I do. What I do now merges my two loves, working with young people and working in the arts. [...] Attitudinal Healing Connection (AHC), the organization I run, is a 30-plus years old organization, founded by my mother and stepfather. At AHC we have **12 principles of attitudinal healing**. We utilize these principles in every aspect of our program. We want our young people to feel like they are powerful beings and that they have potential. We want young people to be exposed to the broader world out there to different ways of being and doing; and we want young people to be spiritually connected. AHC helps people to develop a strong core.

In 2015 one of our artists, Antonio Ramos, was shot and killed creating a mural, the third in the **Oakland**

ATTITUDINAL HEALING PRINCIPLE NO. 9

WE ARE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS TO EACH OTHER

Image: "Cycles of Creation" (2023), by Munirah Harris, Operations Associate for The Center for ArtEsteem. Featuring "Canvas Quilt" created at the ArtEsteem after school program by the students of West Oakland Middle School; and "The Community Foods Market Mural". The quilt encompasses the critical comprehension and positive self-expression The Center for ArtEsteem advocates for. It speaks to Attitudinal Healing Principle #9, as the intergenerational, cyclic process of Gee's Bend quilting is the embodiment of "We are students and teachers to each other." On the mural: Mother Mary Ann Wright and the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for Children Program. Lead artist Jack Leamy, assistant Angel Jesus Perez, and various student artists from CCA.

Architects have often built their legitimacy as technocratic experts, resulting in architectural projects such as nursing homes that segregate individuals deemed in need of curing. Our project questions the role of the architect as an ally of a curing and policing state, which assumes aging as a condition in need of a cure. Instead, we followed Eli Clare's call to "rebel[] against cure" (Clare, 2017). In lieu of a top-down approach, "Aging Against the Machine" builds on diverse forms of knowledge and expertise.

Making visible, connecting, and expanding local initiatives and amplifying resident voices, the project manifests through proposals in a range of scales. Grounding this proposed building are a number of interventions ranging from interior home renovations to collective land ownership models and new strategies for transportation. Diverse spaces for commoning and networks of care at the scale of the building and the neighborhood are integrated with public social programs and mutual aid initiatives.

Project Team: Neeraj Bhatia, THE OPEN WORKSHOP, CCA; Ignacio G. Galan, Barnard College, NY; Karen Kubej, Daniels Faculty, Toronto in collaboration with Annie Ledbury, East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation.

Resident Collaborators: David Peters, Black Liberation Walking Tour; Juanita Nevris Cross, Ernest Johnson, Madlyn Johnson, Secret Peoples, Jackie Peters, Jesse Williams.

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Radical Imagination

[UN]Commoning Architectural Language

[UN]COMMONING THE ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE, by Shreya Shankar
The *[UN]Commoning Architectural Language* symposium was a collective clearing of the eyes. It was activated by interdisciplinary pantheon of artists, architects, and educators Nyame Brown, Ife Salema Venable, Bz Zhang, and Lonny Brooks, and facilitated by masters of ceremonies and CCA professors Uzoma Idah and Michael Washington. The panelists offered foundational teachings in worldbuilding by sharing their own explorations bridging art and architecture towards healing and liberation. Through each participant's oeuvre, we were invited to re-member the wonder and possibility available in the work of built environment alchemy.

Together, the panelists land us in the [UN]Commons. Where commoning is surrealized; where it evolves into worldbuilding. Each participant offered transmissions unlocking different dimensions of worldbuilding in practice. I've compiled these transmissions into 10 codes.

10 CODES FROM THE [UN]COMMONS :

- Consider the connection between land, building, and body. Feel into the space, weight, it takes up. If the body was a place, where would it be? What would be built on it?
- Create characters for the new worlds we're dreaming into. Get to know them. Work with them across different scenarios and story-lines.
- Make new mythologies. The old stories are food for new worlds.
- Find your own surreal eyes. Wipe away the world's projections, and see in full color. Retrieve the magic embedded in all the places you thought you knew.

EDITOR:

Julia Grinkrug

FEATURED INTERVIEWS:

Dorothy Lazard
Ms. Margaret Gordon
Amana Harris

CONTRIBUTORS:

Vanessa Perez Winder
Munirah Harris, The Center for ArtEsteem
Neeraj Bhatia, Karen Kubej, Ignacio González Galán
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- Enter the Pluriverse. Blow the door open for possibility; assume the impossible.
- Investigate the roots. Interrogate the origin, and think critically about where each story begins.
- The Both / And. What if all scenarios are not just possible, but present right now? Consider the many dimensions that co-exist within the present moment just beyond our perception, like colors outside the human visible spectrum, or ancestors that stand beside us.
- Make magic in the basics. Architectural drawing conventions have more capacity for magic than architectural education might have us believe.
- Let ancestral ways lead us. Learning from family and older generations can teach us what came before. And what came before can open our imagination to what comes next.
- Architectural documents facilitate dialogues between timelines & dimensions. With each drawing, we dream into a future scenario. With each drawing, we get to renew our commitment to life-nourishing regenerative possibilities.

Tending to the imagination is critical work, especially in times of unprecedented possibility. Each of these codes can be a design prompt or a tool in our growing toolkits to surrealize commoning. [...] In closing, I offer myself and each reader who made it this far a permission slip : We are welcome to name, claim, and walk in our values. We are welcome to form + find new value systems that are in the right relationship with the earth. Our freedom dreams are welcome into reality. Let this be a green light to worldbuilders living in the new, now.

The unabridged version of this article originally appeared as "10 Codes from the [UN]Commons : : A How-To Guide To Worldbuilding" in Volume 4 of *Revind Review Respond*, an online publication produced by California College of the Arts students.

Image: "AlturSpace-AlturSpace", by Shreya Shankar, Manpreet Malhi, Vishakh Suri, Advanced Design Studio, [Un]Common Ground: Revealing the Ground Floor, 2022

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WEST

RADICAL
IMAGINATION

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

OAKLAND
STORIES

ROOTED

IN LIVED EXPERIENCE

JAN 2017
The Village, aka The
Promised Land, is built
at Grove Shafter Park

JAN 2018
Oakland looks to move
forward

JAN 2020
The BK Curbside
Community is built

SEP 2022
Caltrans crews
remove unhoused
residents from
Wood Street

CO-CREATION

IS

CO
LIBERATION

